

The Need Of Implementing More Effective Programs To Reduce Youth Unemployment: The Case Of Slovakia

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Abstract

The article illustrates the size of the problem of youth unemployment in Slovakia based on the recent development influenced by the latest crisis. It introduces certain attempts of the economic policy undertaken in Slovakia to tackle this issue. And finally it assesses the efficiency of one of the related ALMP measures – graduate practice program. Young people - generally with less skills and fewer work experience - face serious barriers when entering the labour market in a long-run in Slovakia. Therefore several policy measures were introduced, including so-called 'contribution to graduate practice' (under § 51 of Act on Employment Services) targeted to enhance employability of graduates by improving their major work-related skills. The cost evaluation of this measure revealed that although it has a certain positive effect on youth employment, it was associated with low efficiency and cost ineffectiveness.

Keywords: Youth unemployment, active labor market policy, graduate practice program

Introduction

Young people belong to the workforce segments which commonly face the greatest barriers when entering the labour market. Besides being disadvantaged by less skills and weaker job experience, they are frequently confronted with fewer job opportunities, indecent wages, education/qualification and labour market needs mismatch, etc. Young people are considered as one of the vulnerable groups on the labour markets and especially in times of unfavourable economic development their chances of getting a job considerably decreases.

The economic crisis and youth unemployment

As the last economic crisis proved, the young workforce is severely exposed to the downward swings of the economic cycle in terms of employment opportunities. Also in case of the Slovak Republic, the youngest groups were the ones hit the most by the crisis adaptation processes which took place at the labour market (considering the changes in un/employment rates by age cohorts). While unemployment rates of middle aged and older workers basically copied the development of total unemployment, youth unemployment rate “exploded” between the first and last quarters of 2009 and it has remained high since then.

The long-term view at youth unemployment across the Europe reveals that prior the crisis Slovakia experienced significant convergence in the unemployment rate of young people. In 2000, the unemployment rate of persons aged 25 and less in Slovakia was not only twice as high as the European average, it was actually the highest one among today’s EU28 countries (recording the value of 37.3 %). However, in 2002 the unemployment of young people started to decline and after Slovakia’s accession to the European Union the positive trend in youth employment continued; closely before the crisis the trend even accelerated: in 2008, the unemployment rate of persons under 25 years of age was only 3.5 p.p. higher than the EU average and Slovakia ranked seventh within the EU countries in this aspect (to compare, in 2000 it was app. 20 p.p. higher than the EU average). Last time Slovakia ranked first in Europe was in 2001 with unemployment rate of people younger than 25 years reaching 40 %; Slovakia and Poland, former “leaders” in youth unemployment, reduced their unemployment rates of persons in the youngest group (under 25 years old) to less than a half between 2000 and 2008, which led to the mentioned notable convergence to the EU average.

Owing to the consequences of the crisis, unemployment rate of young people peaked again and jumped from its 2008 historic low (less than 20 %; approaching EU average significantly) to over 33 % directly after the recession (2009, in case of Slovakia) and has remained above this level for next 4 years (33 % means that every third person aged 25 or less was unemployed during this period). Only in 2014, the unemployment rate in youngest group finally dropped below 30 % (for the first time since 2009), which was in line with total unemployment decline observed in the economy.

However, between 2009 and 2014, only two age cohorts recorded unemployment rate higher than the total unemployment rate in the economy: persons aged 25 and less and persons aged 25-29 years (in the second group unemployment peaked in 2013 when it reached 18.6 %). At the same time, the age groups 20-24 years and 25-29 years comprise two largest groups of unemployed persons (when decomposed by 5-years age cohorts), both of

them consisting of app. 60 thousands unemployed persons (annually, in average over 2009-2014).

The favourable development in the Slovak labour market continued also in 2015 and in line with the general employment growth, also the unemployment rate of youngest people dropped (to 26.4 %) and in the group of persons aged 25-29 years it approached the total unemployment rate even closer, when it declined to 12.2 %. In absolute terms, it means decrease in the number of unemployed persons aged under 30 years by 21 thousands (year-on-year). To compare, the total unemployment declined by 44 thousands persons (i.e. almost half of a decrease in unemployment in 2015 in Slovakia was due to decline in youth unemployment). However, there are still app. 97 thousands of young persons (under 30 years of age) unemployed (almost one third of total unemployment in Slovakia).

Policy response to tackle youth unemployment

Also in the European scale, some improvement could have been observed in last two years. In 2015 the youth unemployment in EU28 declined by 820 thousands persons (aged less than 30 years) to 7.9 million, which represents a decline by almost 150 thousand persons larger than a year before. However, youth unemployment still counts for more than 34 % of total unemployment in Europe (if defined as persons younger than 30 years).

No wonder that many policy attempts are focused on this issue; national programs as well as international strategies are adopted to design and introduce new measures to tackle youth unemployment (especially measures of active labour market policy). The European Commission introduced the Youth Guarantee programme as a flagship initiative to improve transition from school to work. The initiative is partially financed by the EU resources and should help young people to find either job, internship or further education within 4 months after graduation or getting to the unemployment. In Slovakia, the government assigned 200 million Euros to cover programs of Youth Guarantee initiative over 2014-2015 (50 million Euros planned to be withdrawn from the state budget, 72 million covered from ESF and the rest in the form of dotation specific for Youth Guarantee initiative; Šikulová, 2014).

Already before implementation of the new programs, other projects were carried out in the Slovak Republic within the previous programming period (2007-2013). Two dominant nationwide projects were realised under The Operational Programme Employment and Social Inclusion (OP EaSI) beginning with November 2012: “supporting of employability of unemployed in the municipalities” and “supporting of new jobs creation”. The support was financed by ESF resources and realised in form of a contribution to cover part of the wage costs related to the employment

contract for job applicants in age under 30 years (young job seekers registered by the labour offices). By the end of 2014 (both projects continued also parallel to the new programming period) 756 job openings were supported within the program “supporting of employability of unemployed in the municipalities” (where employers were towns, cities, municipalities and organisations in their administration) and 8,959 job openings were supported under the program “supporting of new jobs creation” (where supported applicant had to be registered as unemployed within the labour office at least for 3 months). Another 2,963 job contracts were supported under the continuation programs “supporting of new jobs creation II and III” (outside Bratislava region; numbers published by Ministry of Labour; see MLSAaF SR, 2015). Among the concrete results of policy response to youth unemployment, the Ministry of Labour presents that sustainability rate of nearly 13,000 jobs for unemployed young people supported by these programs seems to be relatively high: 80 % of 7 thousand placed young people, whose obligatory ‘job preservation period’ after termination of ESF contribution ended by the summer of 2014, remained placed in jobs.

Besides these project activities undertaken in public and private sectors with ESF support (receiving of applications was terminated over the year 2014), the government administration has introduced other activities within the European Youth Guarantee initiative – in the area of improving early intervention, the labour offices provided targeted information and advisory services, assistance for students in career choices, they prepared several information markets (including presentation of EURES services), provided support for adaptation of an employee in new employment, intervened in communication with potential employers etc. The importance of early intervention is confirmed i.a. by the latest research where the regression analysis was used to reveal that age and qualification are the decisive factors increasing chances to escape from unemployment. Younger people exhibit higher probability to escape from unemployment and with every year of age the escape rate (probability to escape from unemployment trap) decreases by app. 7 % (Lubyová, 2015).

In summer 2014 (i.e. at the time of completion of mentioned programs), the Commission still ranked Slovakia among eight countries with “serious” implementation problems in respect to Youth Guarantee plans. The recommendations included structural measures such as strengthening capacity of public employment services, building partnership to reach inactive young persons not registered with the labour offices and developing of better apprenticeship system (Andor, 2014). The supply of skilled labour is hampered by limited labour market relevance of education. Despite the government effort to improve employability of young people and to reform vocational education and training, the youth unemployment rate still belongs

to the higher ones in Europe. The Commission sees the relatively low percentage of job-oriented bachelor programmes and insufficient cooperation with employers as a barrier to increase labour market relevance of education in Slovakia. Improving the quality of higher education, enhancing cooperation between businesses and educational bodies and providing work-based learning in companies would not only help to decrease youth unemployment but will also help to improve innovation capacity of the economy (EC, 2014).

In fact, the mismatch between qualification of the graduates and the employment opportunities represents a serious problem under the Slovak conditions (described in details in Šikulová, 2014). Moreover, the structure of (public) educational system is an area with a relatively high resistance to changes. Thanks to that the expected development can be forecasted quite precisely based on the demographic prognosis and the preferences of the students (in terms of preferred fields of study). The recent forecast made by Lichner and Štefánik (Lichner – Štefánik, 2015) reveals that social sciences and humanities will remain the most preferred area of study among tertiary education graduates. The graduates in majors such as education, history, psychology, journalism, etc. (Field 7 of national classification of education branches) together with graduates in economy, politics, law and philosophy (Field 6) will represent 60 % of total number of tertiary level graduates. To compare, the second largest group, technical sciences students (Fields 2 and 3) will compound only 17 % of all graduates. As a result, in many cases graduates from humanities and social sciences are willing to take a job not adequate to their qualification. The jobs for technical professionals remain open and the labour supply-demand mismatch preserves. The similar qualification/skill and job mismatch is obvious also when secondary education is considered as well as level of education attained.

Although placing of almost 13 thousand young people with a support of the above mentioned ESF programs is a positive achievement, at the time of the programs' expiration (2014) there were 117 thousand young people unemployed in Slovakia. The Slovak government made another step to make some progress in the field of work-based learning by adopting a new Act on Vocational Education and Training which entered into force in 2015. Another legislation attempt focused on promoting youth employment consists in the amendment to the Act on Employment Services effective from January 2015 which introduces a new form of support for young people in their first regular paid employment (§51a). The measure is realised in form of contribution to employers who employ those young people (up to 25/29 years old) registered as unemployed with the labour offices for a given minimum period of time, who previously did not had a permanent paid employment. This measure is actually targeted to two groups of unemployed

at once: the youngest age groups, but also to people with none previous work experience. The unemployed who have never had a job in fact constitute a significant part of the total unemployment in Slovakia - nearly one quarter of all unemployed falls into this category. Some of them are young people, graduates, to which the new measure is targeted the most. However, the weakness of the measure is that the amount of resources to cover it is insufficient related to the number of young people unemployed, the contribution is not claimable (employers who fulfil the criteria have no guarantee to receive the contribution) and it falls only to new job openings (no support for employers who want to replace leaving workforce with young unemployed).

Effectiveness of the Contribution to graduate practice (§ 51)

This part of the paper will focus on the other aspect of promoting the youth employment – the effectiveness of the selected active labour market policy program “Contribution to graduate practice (§ 51)” targeted at young people, graduates, registered with the labour offices as job seekers. Between 2010 and mid 2011 the age limit for participation in this program was set to 25 years and since 1 July 2011 this age limit has increased to 26 years. Duration of this program is from 3 months to 6 months with the maximum of 20 hours per week and without the possibility to prolong or repeat it. The amount of the participant’s contribution was at the level of 100 % of the minimum income standard but recently it has been decreased to 65 % which together with other modifications (e.g. the practice has to correspond strictly with the participant’s education) contributed to significantly lower total number of participants (Amendment of Act No. 5/2004 on Employment Services and on the Amendment of Certain Acts).

Methodology

In the evaluation process of the economic return of costs spent on the graduate practice program of active labour market policy (ALMP) we used cost benefit analysis (CBA). The similar analysis has been already conducted by the authors for the public works programs (e.g. Dovál’ová, Hvozdíková, 2014).

CBA is a useful tool for decision making, whereby it serves to assess whether the costs of a particular program which are related to its implementation are less than its benefits. The advantage of this method is the ability to assess the overall effectiveness of the program of ALMP, which means that in practice there may be a case in which the program can be effective in relation to the increasing of the program participants’ employment but at the same time it can be excessively expensive. The advantage of the cost benefit analysis is also the fact that it allows the

description of the wider social impacts of particular ALMP programs, which is important for evaluating the results which have already been achieved. When using this method, all costs and benefits are measured in monetary terms, whereby it is necessary to take into account only the effects of the particular program which is being evaluated at that moment. From the perspective of realizing programs of active labour market policy, the effects could be measured from the point of view of the program participants', government or the economy as a whole (Table 1).

Problems associated with the quantification of the costs and benefits which are difficult to convert to cash flows present the significant limitation of this method. In this case, it is possible to express effects only in a qualitative way. Due to the unavailability of data for a comprehensive assessment of all aspects of this issue, we will in the next part of this article pay closer attention only to the analysis of the costs and benefits for the graduate practice program from the government's point of view, which means from the public finance's point of view according to the prof. O'Higgins (2009) methodology.

Table 1 Overview of the quantifiable costs and benefits arising from the implementation of active labour market policy programs

	Benefits	Costs
Economy	Value of new jobs created	Total cost of the program
	Potential multiplication effects	
Government	Increased taxation	Total cost of the program
	Social security/health contributions paid on employees	
	Reduction in health and social benefit payments	
Program participants	Increase of disposable income	Decrease/loss of state social benefit payments

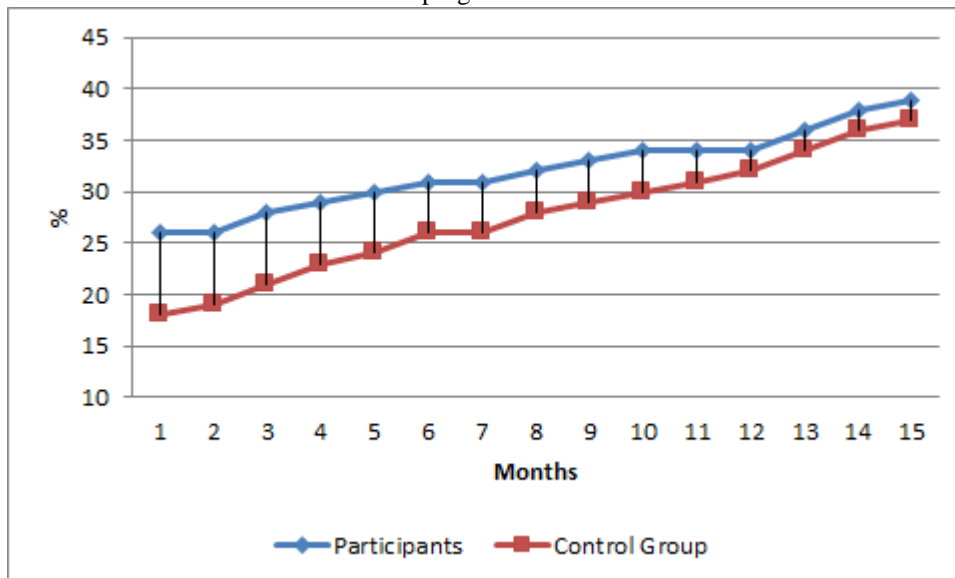
Source: O'Higgins (2009).

We evaluate only the direct effects; indirect effects are not rated. Technically, our approach means that for the chosen program of active labour market policy "Contribution to graduate practice (§ 51)" we will compare the current value of all benefits with the current value of all costs related to the realization of this program in terms of public finances. In calculating the benefits for the government we come out from the analysis of the programs' impact on employment within 15 months after finishing participation in the program (Figure 1).¹⁴ The positive effect of this program of ALMP can be seen during the whole analysed period. This means that

¹⁴ This analysis was performed by Štefánik, Lubyová, Dovál'ová, Karasová (2014).

participants of this program had a higher probability to find a job on the open labour market compared to the situation when a person has been not involved in such a scheme.

Figure 1 Probability of job placement for participants of “Contribution to graduate practice” (§ 51) program and for the participants of the control group within 15 months after finishing the program in 2011¹⁵



Note: Calculated from the individual data of the Centre Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of SR using contrafactual impact analysis.

Source: Štefáňik, Lubyová, Dovál'ová, Karasová (2014).

The calculation of benefits for the government over the next five years is based on the approximation of the present value of all future flows arising from the realization of this program. Conversion to the present value is realized by discounting future flows¹⁶.

Benefits for the state budget can be expressed as:

$$GB = \sum_i^n \left[\frac{HB_i + SB_i + IB_i + T_i}{r} \right]$$

GB presents government benefits, HB saving in contributions from the Health Insurance Company, SB savings on state social benefits, IB contribution to the social insurance company and T benefits from direct and indirect taxes (VAT).

¹⁵ It takes into the account the removing from the database of the Central Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the SR due to placement in the labour market.

¹⁶ According to the communication of the European Commission, the reference (discount) rate for the Slovak Republic was from January 2011 set at the level of 1.45 %. (http://ec.europa.eu/competition/state_aid/legislation/base_rates_eu27_en.pdf).

Two variants have been analysed.

In variant 1 (gross effect) we analysed the impact of the graduate practice program's realization on public finances, thus we compare the costs of the program with the gross benefits of the program participants in the short term as well as in the mid-term, which means within 5 years after finishing participation in the program. In variant 2 (net effect) we analysed the net effect of the graduate practice program, which means the gross benefit of the program participants reduced by the gross benefit of the control group is compared with costs spent for this program.

Gross benefit means only the benefit accruing from the placement of job seekers supported under the ALMP program. By net benefit we mean the benefit accruing from the placement of job seekers supported under the ALMP program reduced by benefit accruing from the control group.

The gross effect means benefits of the ALMP program participants reduced by the costs of the particular program. Thus, when calculating the gross effect, we only considered whether the costs for the program were returned to the government during the reporting period via benefits "derived" from the participants of graduate practice program. The net effect of ALMP program on public finances represents the difference between net benefits and initial costs for the ALMP program. In calculating the net effect we compared initial costs for the program with net benefits (gross benefits of program participants accruing to the government reduced by the benefits of the control group). When evaluating the net effect of the program it should be taken into account that the control group considers only some common characteristics with the program participants (e. g. age, education, sex, region, length of unemployment etc. but some characteristics such as criminal records of job applicants etc. could be not considered for objective reasons). So we are aware of the fact that there is some disproportion in expressing the situation that would occur in case that the program would not be implemented.¹⁷

Cost-benefit analysis of Contribution to graduate practice

In Table 2 we can see the total expenditures on the graduate practice program between 2009 and 2013. Expenditures on this program significantly increased from 5.9 million Euros in 2009 to 16 million Euros in 2010. Thus, total expenditures on this program grew faster than total expenditures on ALMP programs. In 2013, not only the total expenditures on ALMP programs decreased, but the decline (from 15.9 million Euros in 2012 to 8.8

¹⁷ Due to the complexity of the issue and the unavailability of necessary data at the time of producing the analysis, the authors considered several simplifications which are in more details (together with the detailed methodology) described in Štefánik, Lubyová, Dovál'ová, Karasová (2014).

million Euros in 2013) in expenditures on this graduate practice program could be also observed. However, according to the data from Statistical office of SR, the unemployment rate in the age group of 15 to 24 years increased between 2009 and 2013 from 27.3 % (in absolute terms it means that approximately 69,800 young people were jobless) to 33.6 % (the growth to approximately 73,000 young people out of work).¹⁸

Table 2 Expenditures on the graduate practice programs (§ 51), in Euros

Year	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Total expenditures on the graduate practice program (§ 51)	5,914,724	16,082,999	14,910,708	15,930,823	8,790,098
Total expenditures on ALMP programs (categories 2-7)	94,388,159	152,660,998	154,190,066	135,714,790	125,693,000
The share of expenditure on the graduate practice program	6.3%	10.5%	9.7%	11.7%	6.9%

Source: Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic.

Gross effect of the graduate practice program on public finance

The calculation of the gross effect of graduate practice program is based on the fact that in 2011 around 10,035,404 Euros were spent on this program and about 76.8 % of expenditure came from the European Social Fund (ESF). The total number of the participants who were included into the analysis is 11,642 persons.

In Table 3 we can see the effects of providing graduate practice program on public finance in the short (within 1 year) and medium terms (within 5 years). We can see that the costs of this program are returned to the state budget within one year in both scenarios (in the Scenario 1, which means that participants would be employed after completing the program on the open labour market for the minimum wage, the costs are returned approximately within one year; in the Scenario 2, which means that participants would be employed for the median wage (in accordance with age, education and residency), the costs are returned half a year earlier. In case that we consider only the resources expended from the state budget, it is possible to expect even shorter payback period. The short return period of the expenses for this program is mainly influenced by the relatively high rates of the program participants' placement in the open labour market after finishing the program. But it is also necessary to take into account the fact that the target group is young people who have greater labour mobility. This factor is very important mainly in the regions with the high average unemployment rate.

¹⁸ In 2015 the unemployment rate in this age group was on the level of 26.4 %, which means that there were about 55,300 young people unemployed.

Table 3 Gross effect of the graduate practice program (in Euros)

Year	Costs of the programs		Scenario 1			Scenario 2		
	State budget (1)	ESF (2)	Gross benefits (3)	Total effect /3-(1+2)/	Partial effect /3-1/	Gross benefits (4)	Total effect /4-(1+2)/	Partial effect /4-1/
0	2,328,214	7,707,190	x	x	x	x	x	x
1. year	x	x	11,619,273	1,583,869	9,291,059	21,076,300	11,040,896	18,748,086
2. year	x	x	25,998,573	15,963,169	23,670,359	47,058,481	37,023,077	44,730,267
3. year	x	x	40,291,808	30,256,404	37,963,594	72,880,107	62,844,703	70,551,893
4. year	x	x	54,380,752	44,345,348	52,052,538	98,332,671	88,297,267	96,004,457
5. year	x	x	68,268,327	58,232,923	65,940,113	123,421,447	113,386,043	121,093,233

Source: Own calculations.

Net effect of the graduate practice program on public finance

Table 4 shows the net effect of the graduate practice program. The costs of the program are compared with the net benefits (gross benefits of the program participants are lowered by the benefits for the government from the control group). The estimation of net benefits is based on the probability rates of program participants' placement in the open labour market after finishing the programs and those of control group, which were calculated in the previous work (Štefánek, Lubyová, Dovál'ová, Karasová, 2014) and which we have shown in the Methodology section. As it can be seen in Table 4, the total costs of this program will not be returned through net effects in the short or medium term regardless of the scenario. In case that we consider only the resources expended from the state budget, a relatively short payback period can be expected, approximately less than two years (Scenario 1) or less than one year (Scenario 2).

Table 4 Net effects of the graduate practice program (in Euros)

Year	Costs of the program		Scenario 1			Scenario 2		
	State budget (1)	ESF (2)	Net benefits (3)	Total effect /3-(1+2)/	Partial effect /3-1/	Net benefits (4)	Total effect /4-(1+2)/	Partial effect /4-1/
0	2,328,214	7,707,190	x	x	x	x	x	x
1. year	x	x	1,947,266	-8,088,138	-380,948	3,432,171	-6,603,233	1,103,957
2. year	x	x	2,607,497	-7,427,907	279,283	4,545,120	-5,490,284	2,216,906
3. year	x	x	3,227,704	-6,807,700	899,490	5,589,602	-4,445,802	3,261,388
4. year	x	x	3,839,046	-6,196,358	1,510,832	6,619,155	-3,416,249	4,290,941
5. year	x	x	4,441,651	-5,593,753	2,113,437	7,633,994	-2,401,410	5,305,780

Source: Own calculations.

Conclusion

After initial signs of economic recovery in Europe, labour market parameters continued to stagnate. Only in the last two years, we could have observed improving of employment in many European economies, with a positive effect on youth unemployment as well. However, young people still compound one third of total unemployment in Europe. Also in case of Slovakia, the unemployment rate for two youngest groups (below 25 years; and 25-29 years) has recorded levels above total unemployment rate in a long-run. The last economic crisis proved that young people are extremely exposed to the economic cycle swings. Even though some signals of improvement came with the favourable economic development in latest months, the recovery of youth employment remains fragile.

Since young people are considered to be one of the disadvantaged groups in the labour market, specific measures of ALMP to tackle youth unemployment should be implemented. From our cost-benefit analysis it can be seen that graduate practice program has a positive impact on youth employment. In gross effect, it is possible to expect that financial expenditure spent on this program could be paid back in a short time period. However, on the net effect we do not expect the expenditure return either in the short or medium term period, we can expect it only in case that we consider just the expenditures spent on this program from the state budget.

More profound realisation of Youth Guarantee programs is expected by implementation of plans of the new programming period (2014-2020) and its priority “Initiative to support employment of young people” within which sustainable integration of young job applicants will be addressed, especially those not in employment, education or training (NEET), including young people threatened by social exclusion.

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